



Chapter 20

Bits and Pieces

This is the final chapter in a book that really has no end. There are so many things still to be told—little things that should have a place in a book like this. Like things that happen flying over the city. Things look different from above. Flower beds, swimming pools and building architecture take on a new perspective. Objects you are used to seeing from street level look entirely different from the air. From above, colorful flowerbeds and shrubbery form interesting patterns around the homes. Whole housing areas and apartment complexes melt into a large pattern of gently curving streets with parks and green belt areas nestled here and there. You have the privilege of seeing all this from the viewpoint of the original designer, as he must have laid out his plans and dreamed his dreams.

Of course people are all part of this and the sound of a burner flame on a hot air balloon draws them like a moth to a light. People rush out their doors to wave at you, and sometimes children ride along on bicycles trying to keep up with the balloon. People often don't realize you can see them as easily as they can see you. Balloon flying is done early in the morning and when people hear or see a balloon they sometimes rush into their yards with little or nothing on. They usually stare up at you wide eyed until you wave and say hello. Then they suddenly realize their state of undress and rush back inside to stare out of doors or peer from behind curtains.

People also love to take pictures of balloons and can sometimes become very preoccupied in the process. One day we

were flying over a rather well-to-do neighborhood looking for a suitable place to land when a man appeared in a large backyard complete with a swimming pool, carrying a fancy camera with a long telephoto lens. As we approached he took several pictures, rushing back and forth to get different angles. Just as we were about to pass directly over him he tilted the camera up and started backing up. The only problem was he was backing toward the swimming pool. We hollered in vain as we watched him back over the edge and into the brink.

Shutterbugs are everywhere. Five to ten pictures are taken of our balloon every time we fly. We always try to be nice to these people. One time George and I were flying slowly over a neighborhood when a couple, taking pictures from the street in front of their house, jokingly invited us down for a cup of coffee. George set the balloon down neatly in the intersection and asked for cream and sugar. The lady of the house simply couldn't believe her eyes and her husband had to tap her on the shoulder to get her to go back into the house to get the coffee. We sat in the middle of the street for several minutes drinking coffee and then we took two of their out-of-town visitors for a short ride.

Small children are fun. Anytime I get the chance I try to land in a schoolyard. The children come running from everywhere to gather around the gondola, dancing and laughing and asking all sorts of questions. This is true outside of schoolyards too. On one occasion we landed in a vacant lot in a small neighborhood and about a dozen kids gathered around in less than a minute. George answered several questions, then asked the kids if anyone would like to have a ride. Of course, most hollered, "YES!". "OK," said George. "You have to get your mother's permission first." The kids vanished into houses like smoke in a wind and soon they returned, usually with a mother in tow. We selected four and stuffed them into the gondola, giggling and laughing. George took off and floated over to the next vacant lot, and set down. We did this two more times before we had to fly on.

The people we meet in ballooning, both from the air and on the ground, are very important to us. So far we have taken over 150 people for a ride in Sundancer and thousands of people have seen her in the sky above their homes. This means we

have shared hot air ballooning in some small way with all of these people and this adds another nice dimension to the sport.

Some of my favorite memories are about "Fun Rallies" we flew with the other Albuquerque balloonists on the mesa west of the city. Over the years we developed many close friends in this group and did many many fun things together. They didn't always work out the way we planned. One time we held a race where we planned to launch about two miles away, fly back to a target, and see who could touch down closest to the center. The problem was, the wind quit totally right after we launched and all the balloons just hung in the sky like ornaments on a tree. No one could pick up a wind current that would even bring them close to the target. We had just about all given up and returned to the launch site to visit and have a few refreshments when a pickup came swaying up the hill with a balloon still inflated in the bed. They pulled up beside the target and pointed out that the rules for that day had said nothing about flying the balloon, only that the balloon could not touch the ground between the launch point and the landing. They claimed their balloon had landed in the back of the pickup and since it had not touched the ground, they were the winners. We couldn't let them get away with that, so the Sundancer crew quickly grabbed a cigarette lighter and an old letter envelope, pulled our gondola out of the pickup, and carried it to the target with the lighter held above it and the so-called balloon "envelope" held above the lighter's flame. Our argument was that if one qualified, the other one did to. Everyone voted and they awarded each of us one bottle of beer which they threatened to pour over our heads.

Someone in this group was always concocting some new kind of balloon event. In a ribbon race a fifty foot length of crepe paper ribbon is stretched between two balloons, with a light weight three inch ring looped over the ribbon at one end. The balloons take off together and at a minimum of fifty feet above the ground they attempt to pass the ring from one balloon to the other before the ribbon stretches enough to break. To do this the balloon with the ring has to be slightly higher than the other in order to slide the ring down to the other balloon. This is tough to do because the balloons tend to drift

apart and controlling the rate of ascent that precisely is very difficult. I never saw a successful passage of the ring. The balloons always drifted too far apart and broke the ribbon before the ring could be passed.

Some events required no skill and included the chase crew in the fun. In a poker race, every pilot is given seven poker cards in sealed envelopes. Every time you landed close to another balloon, a member of your crew was supposed to grab an envelope from your hand and exchange envelopes with the crew of the other balloon. The best poker hand at the end of the day wins this race. The problem this day was that the denominations of the cards could be seen through the envelopes, so every time we landed the chase crew took all the cards along and bartered with the other crew to exchange cards and make up a better poker hand. It wasn't exactly honest, but everyone was playing by the same rules, so who cared? By the time we were done, our crew and five other crews had either a full house or a flush. A crew with six aces won the contest.

Variations of gambling games were popular. We couldn't play Blackjack, but we did use a balloon event called "Twenty-One." In this race, the field is laid out in large squares numbered one to ten. The goal is to fly across the field and drop bags onto squares to total up to twenty-one points. Only one bag can be dropped in each square on a single pass. When the race is held on a day where the wind currents permit the balloons to maneuver in a box pattern, the competition is quite intense. Each balloon can often make more than one pass over the field and try to better their score.

Attend any rally and you will notice several things. Hot air balloons come in all shapes and sizes. There are balloons so small that they will carry only one person. The pilot sits in a sling hanging under the envelope. There are several other sizes of balloons that permit from two to nine passengers to be carried. The largest free flying hot air balloon is owned by Sid Cutter in Albuquerque and can carry up to twenty-four passengers. To give you some idea of the relative size, Sundancer can carry four passengers and the envelope contains 77,500 cubic feet of hot air. The envelope on the Big One contains over 410,000 cubic feet of hot air. This is over five times as large.

Hot air balloons can be built in crazy shapes. A prominent popcorn company built one shaped like a huge popcorn kernel. It didn't seem to fly too well, but it certainly drew a lot of attention at rallies. Another man built a balloon shaped like a whale; it didn't fly too well either. Then there's the football fan whose balloon looks like the head of an Oklahoma University football player complete with a face mask. There is also a whiskey firm with a hot air balloon shaped like a huge bottle of scotch, five stories high. Everytime I see it, I can't help wondering what it would be like to wake up with a stiff hangover and see that thing flying outside the window. And let's not forget a balloon shaped like a package of cigarettes and another like a pair of blue jeans.

There are several hot air blimps in operation around the country. Some of them are bigger than the helium blimps which advertise tires. We saw one hot air blimp shaped like a green space ship. This strange apparatus had a gondola with an engine and an airplane prop, so it could be guided by a crude elevator and tailfin arrangement. As it flew over, alien creatures stared down out of portholes.

Balloon designs are as varied as their owners. Many companies have found that a hot air balloon can be a very effective means for advertising their products. However, most balloon designs reflect the desires of people to fly something beautiful, purely for the sake of being beautiful. They are as different as the designer's imagination and the size of the owner's pocket-book permit. Every balloonist I know has a dream balloon in mind. Most of us will never be able to afford to build our dreams, but we still dream. If you attend almost any rally, you will see a few true works of art floating in the sky. Take pictures of them if you can, because the beauty you see is fragile and fleeting. In a few years the colors will fade and the envelope will wear out. Only the pictures will remain. I too have a dream balloon. It is done in reds and blues, with dancers depicted on three panels. You see, for me balloons have always been the dancers of the skies. Every time we fly, we waltz with the wind and the sun.

As I said at the start of this chapter, it's hard to find a place to stop. Ballooning—and lots of the rest of life—keeps going on. This book has covered our New Mexico experiences and makes

as good a stopping place as any. In December of 1981 we left Albuquerque and traveled to a new job and a new life in Fort Collins, Colorado. Sundancer came along.

We left many friends behind and enough memories to fill a book. We still go back to visit and to relive the thrill of flying over the beautiful New Mexico desert. The Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta every Fall draws us like a magnet. We miss things like inflating a balloon among the luminarias on Christmas Eve as well as the close friends who made up our chase crew and whom we only get to see once in awhile now.

Still things ain't all that bad. Now we fly against the backdrop of the beautiful Colorado Rockies and float across rich green croplands. We have a new chase crew made up of some new friends and some renewed friendships from college days. The rallies are much the same and the comradeship is still there. When Sundancer lifts off the ground and people run for the pickup, we never know where we are going to end up. That keeps it forever fresh and new. The pickup loaded with happy people trails along under us and many times other cars join the fun or children on bicycles ride along with us. When we land people run up to the gondola and we know, *Balloons Are For Chasing*.

BALLOONIST'S PRAYER

May the winds welcome you with softness
May the sun bless you with it's warm hands
May you fly so high and so well
that God joins you in laughter
and sets you gently back into the
loving arms of Mother Earth

Author Unknown